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Tuesday, Jul 29, 2003

The Journal Gazette

News

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Flood coordinator follows in mentor's boots

By Dan Stockman
The Journal Gazette

Kim Schieferstein still feels the late Carl O'Neal watching over Fort Wayne's levees, dams and flood plains.

And even if you don't believe that the lights flicker whenever staff discuss improving the aesthetics of dikes and flood walls - efforts O'Neal abhorred - there is no doubting how much influence his career had on the city's efforts to tame the three rivers it is built on.

Schieferstein is a believer.

Now 47, Schieferstein knew O'Neal - widely known as the city's "Flood Czar" - from the time she was 15 years old until his death in 1997. After he died, she was promoted to replace the man who had hired her four years before.

"It was an honor, truly an honor, to come work for Carl O'Neal," Schieferstein said.

Schieferstein is the city's flooding control coordinator, and until floodwaters begin lapping at sandbags earlier this month, her work had remained in obscurity.

But after the barrage of storms pounded the area beginning July 4, residents got to see the results of her job, as the city's 10-mile system of dikes and levees protected thousands of homes from flooding along the northern half of the St. Marys and Maumee rivers.

Schieferstein oversees the levee system, making sure that it is maintained and monitored and that city officials know what to do when the rivers become enemies.

When the waters rose earlier this month, Schieferstein left her desk and helped the city's public works department transform itself from one devoted to keeping sewers running smoothly to one holding back a flood with 250,000 sandbags.

She credits her success to O'Neal and to the man who introduced her to him - her father, Jimmy Stier.

Stier represented the city's 6th District for nearly five terms before retiring

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in 1989 after 17 years on the City Council, and was known as "Mr. Neighborhood."

"That man took a part-time job and made it a full-time job," Schieferstein said of her father and first mentor. Every Sunday afternoon, she said, "he'd hit the 6th District."

Now, Schieferstein walks in both men's shoes, continuing their love of public service.

"It's not just because it was instilled in me, but because I love doing it," she said.

Greg Meszaros, the city's director of public works, said the success of the flood control project in protecting thousands of homes from the Flood of '03, is the direct result of Schieferstein's work.

"That's because of Kim," Meszaros said. "Kim has nurtured and developed a wonderful relationship with the (U.S.) Army Corps (of Engineers) ... it's not by luck that this occurs."

Most of Schieferstein's job involves charts and graphs and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers studies and maps and floodplain elevations.

But when Spy Run Creek overflowed Monday, she was a jeans-wearing, knee-deep-in-the-water dynamo, up and down the sandbag dikes watching numbers on a page come to life as muddy water reached toward homes.

Because she went straight to the scene of the flood at 5:30 a.m. that day, her rubber boots stayed high and dry in her office at the City-County Building while she waded through floodwaters without them.

She talks fast and rarely spends much time on any one subject, and even the multitude of plants in her office seems to reflect her energy, reaching out toward visitors from odd angles and unexpected locations.

"Yeah, I'd say she's got energy," said Rodney Renkenberger, executive director of the Maumee River Basin Commission. "She's energetic, I'll give her that."

But all that energy comes to a focus at the end of the day, thanks to 25 years of meditation.

"I don't go to bed at night with anything that's bothering me," she said. "(Meditation) grounds me and gives me focus. It freshens me up for the next day."

First, she reviews the events of the day one by one, then clears them from her head.

"It's quieting the mind, quieting the body," she said.

And what kind of husband can deal with a career like Schieferstein's? A city flood engineer, of course. Kim and Gary have been married nearly 13 years, and events like the Flood of '03 make their dinner table conversations among the more interesting in the city.

It is during those conversations that the emotional side of their work comes out.

"There's a lot of exchanging of stories," she said. "He's a good listener and I'm a good listener. So even when he's telling me something I already know about, I listen because he's needing to discuss what he's been through."

That emotion runs through the field of flood control because for many, emotion runs as surely as the rivers do. Flood experts talk about people



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who live along the Ohio River whose homes flood every year.

Every year they have to evacuate, and return later to find a house full of mud and a year-old hot water heater that needs to be replaced, but they couldn't be happier, because they're living on the river.

Schieferstein recalls Fort Wayne residents who were evacuated by boat from flooded homes who bitterly opposed the massive diking projects.

"They wanted that same view of the river," she said. "There was a lot of fear - they didn't know what would be in front of their homes."

Army Corps resident engineer Dave Foster said Schieferstein finds a way to balance the sometimes-competing interests.

"Kim has that ability to put together people and knows who to talk to to get tasks accomplished," Foster said. "She's really a good people person."

That attitude is reflected in her office, which between the plants and flood maps is decorated with photos - like the one of Schieferstein and O'Neal - and the proclamation from when Mayor Graham Richard declared it "Jimmy Stier Day" in Fort Wayne.

But ask her how many hours she worked during the Flood of '03, and the conversation eventually returns to O'Neal, and how during the 1982 flood he did not sleep beyond 30-minute catnaps in his office for three weeks.

How big is O'Neal's influence on Schieferstein and flood control in Fort Wayne?

In the Flood of '03, the St. Marys River spilled over its banks here on July 7 - O'Neal's birthday.



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